



# Prevention of Woodpecker Damage to Buildings

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The sights, sounds, and activities of birds provide pleasing, esthetic experiences for most people. Bird calls, colorful plumage, nesting activities, visits to bird feeders, and rearing of young all bring us closer to our natural heritage and establish our environmental ties and awareness.

However, there are times and events when birds or bird activities conflict with human interests. Birds may be looked at as nuisance pests or may even damage crops or structures. Such is the case with various species of woodpeckers and flickers.

These birds belong to the order Piciformes and the family Picidae. Twenty-one species of woodpeckers, sapsuckers, and flickers inhabit the United States. Ten species are commonly found in Montana. These birds are characterized by short legs with opposable sharp-clawed toes and stiff tail feathers. These features allow woodpeckers to cling to tree trunks, wooden house sidings, and on utility poles. Sharp-pointed strong beaks and specially constructed skulls enable woodpeckers to peck and drill holes in wood. Elongated tongues provide a means to search out ants, larvae, and insects for food items. Woodpeckers vary 7 to 15 inches in length and often have spotted or barred markings. Many are black and white and may have brightly colored feathers

on the head or breast. Flickers have reddish or yellow colored under-wing and under-tail feathers. The flight pattern of most species is an undulating, gliding motion with wings folded next to the body following a series of wing beats.

## Range

Woodpeckers are found throughout Montana. Those species found in the western part of the state are Lewis' woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), Williamson's sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*), red-naped sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*), three-toed woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*), black-backed woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*), and pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*). The red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) occurs in eastern Montana and the northern flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) illustrated on the front cover, downy woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), and hairy woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) are common throughout the state.

## Habitat

Woodpeckers usually live in or on the edge of wooded areas since they require trees for food, shelter, and nesting. Nest and shelter cavities are either chiseled in tree trunks or limbs or natural cavities are used. Standing dead trees or snags are often used for these purposes. Some species have readily adapted to and have expanded their range to include structures, such as buildings, utility poles, and fence posts.

## Food Habits

Wood boring or tree dwelling insects comprise major food items for many species of woodpeckers. Flickers consume ground dwelling insects, especially ants. Other species prefer nuts, berries, seeds, and fruit. Sapsuckers feed on tree sap and insects.

## Biology, Behavior, and Reproduction

As their name implies, woodpeckers have the ability to peck holes in trees and wooden structures to find insects and to chisel nesting cavities. Rhythmic pecking also provides a means

of communication (called "drumming") that establishes territories and attracts and signals mates. Drumming usually occurs on resonant dead tree trunks, utility poles, and building siding. Woodpeckers breed in the spring, laying 3 to 6 eggs. Naked or down covered chicks are hatched after 11 to 14 days of incubation. Both parents rear the young.

Most species are resident in the same area year-round, although some species, such as the Lewis' woodpecker, sapsuckers, and the red-headed woodpecker are migratory. Most species are territorial although some live in small, loose social groups.

## Damage

Damage caused to structures by woodpeckers is most often local or regional in nature. However, such damage can be very significant when it occurs. Damage is usually caused by one to several birds and most often effects houses or buildings with wood exteriors that are located near rural wooded areas. Damage most often occurs in February through June, corresponding to the breeding season and territory establishment. The damage may consist of access holes or nesting cavities, pecks caused by drumming, or holes pecked in search of insects that may be beneath the wooden siding. Summer or vacation homes that are vacant part of the year may be particularly vulnerable. Drumming activity may mar the surface of wood but rarely causes substantial damage. However, the noise may become a nuisance, especially in early morning hours.

In some regions of the country, woodpeckers can cause severe and costly damage to utility poles. Weakening of the poles requires frequent replacement. Similar damage has been reported by ranchers and farmers on fence posts. Sapsuckers typically peck a series of parallel holes in tree trunks and limbs. These holes fill with sap which the birds consume along with any attracted or entrapped insects. These holes may weaken the

trees and provide a means of introducing disease and insect damage. "Bird pecks" may also decrease the value of commercial hard and soft woods. Some damage may occasionally occur to beehives by woodpeckers feeding on the bees.

## Damage Control and Prevention

Each individual woodpecker damage case must be carefully assessed when determining the best control and prevention measures. There is no one control that will work in all cases and many cases may require a combination of methods outlined below.



Northern  
Flicker

Woodpeckers become very persistent once territories and nesting has become established. Control and prevention will be most successful when applied other than these times.

It should be remembered that woodpeckers are classified as migratory, nongame birds and are fully protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. A permit must be obtained from the Law Enforcement Division of the US Fish & Wildlife Service for any control methods that result in the capture or death of the birds. Although not occurring in Montana, two species, the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picodides borealis*) and the ivory-billed woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), are classed as Endangered Species and are totally protected.

## Exclusion

*Netting* is becoming increasingly popular to prevent woodpecker damage. When properly installed and maintained it gives consistent results in excluding woodpeckers from building siding beneath the eaves. A bird-type netting of 3/4 - inch mesh is usually recommended. Such netting should remain at least 3 inches away from

the wall being damaged. Netting can be attached to the outer edges of the eaves and slanted back and anchored to the wall below the damaged area. The netting must be attached so that the birds cannot get around or under it. Most netting is very fine and comes in various colors and cannot be seen from a distance. If woodpeckers begin pecking at new locations on the same building, more netting will be needed.

*Metal or plastic barriers*, such as flashing, sheathing, or sheeting can be placed over damaged areas to prevent further damage. This should be accomplished as soon as damage begins. Occasionally the birds will move over to an unprotected area and the protective covering will have to be expanded. The sheathing can be painted or textured to match the wall.

Hardware cloth (1/4 inch) can also be applied to damaged walls, either directly on the surface or raised 1 inch with spacers. It can also be painted to match the wall color.

Once the woodpeckers have been discouraged and are no longer present, the damaged areas should be repaired to prevent woodpeckers from returning at a future time or used by other cavity nesting birds. Trees can also be protected from sapsucker damage by wrapping damaged areas with hardware cloth, plastic mesh, or burlap.

## Frightening Devices

*Visual* stationary models of hawks, owls, snakes, and cats are usually considered ineffective for frightening away woodpeckers from damage sites. Other devices, such as plastic twirlers or windmills, aluminum foil or mylar strips, tin lids, or pie pans that move and reflect can be attached to the eaves near the damage area. These methods have been somewhat successful in repelling damaging woodpeckers. Hanging silhouettes of hawks and balloons with large eyes painted on them have also been used with some success. Effectiveness is often temporary as the woodpeckers become accustomed to the device.

*Sound* and noises, such as hand clapping, cap guns, banging on garbage can lids, etc. will frighten woodpeckers away and, if repeated persistently, may encourage them to leave for good. Propane exploders, while too noisy to use in residential or home areas, may help temporarily discourage woodpeckers in orchards and tree areas. High frequency sound devices have not been shown to effectively repel woodpeckers.

## Repellants

*Taste* altering chemicals applied to utility poles or fence posts have not proven effective or practical in deterring woodpecker activity.

*Odor* producing chemicals, such as naphthalene (mothballs) and wood treatment chemicals have not resolved woodpecker damage problems.

*Tactile* or sticky compounds applied to damaged tree trunks and limbs may help discourage sap-suckers from fruit, shade, or ornamental trees. Some product examples include 4-The-Birds, Tanglefoot, and Roost-No-More. Birds are not entrapped by these chemicals but dislike the sticky footing. These products may not be as effective in cold weather. They can also be used on building siding, but may have to be applied to boards that are attached to the damage area since discoloring and streaking of painted, stained, or natural surfaces may occur.

## Toxicants

Woodpecker damage can be resolved without the use of toxicants and none are registered.

permits must be obtained prior to using lethal means of controlling woodpeckers.

## Shooting

Where it is safe to do so and when proper permits have been obtained, shooting may be the fastest means of dispatching one to a few damage causing woodpeckers. Be sure to check local firearm regulations, especially in residential areas.



Red-naped Woodpecker

Air rifles or .22-caliber bird shot should be effective at close range while shotguns or .22-caliber rifles may be needed for longer distances. Be sure to use proper caution around dwellings. Know what is beyond your target.

## Nest Boxes

Some species of woodpeckers, especially flickers will use artificial cavities and boxes as nesting sites. Nesting boxes installed at damage sites may provide alternative use by the woodpeckers and prevent further building damage. This would be especially desirable where the presence of woodpeckers is wanted but the damage is not.

Nest boxes should measure 22 to 26 inches in height with inside floor dimensions of 6 x 6 inches. The entrance hole should measure about 2 1/2 inches in diameter and be placed 16 to 20 inches above the floor. A hinged, slanted roof will shed rain and allow access. A thick layer of sawdust should be placed in the bottom of the box.

For more information contact the Montana Department of Agriculture at:

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## Trapping

Wooden rat snap traps nailed to the building at damage sites with the trigger downward can effectively kill damage causing woodpeckers. The trap can be baited with nut meats or suet. Proper federal and/or state



Pileated Woodpecker